



A Poet in Center City Pt.1
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Photo by Jeremy Eric Tenenbaum
Mike Land at Molly's Books, South Philadelphia, 2005
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#1

The story of my life in Center City begins on a hot August night outside Philly Java, on Fourth Street between South and Lombard. I had just re-met a poet named Christopher Severin. He was tall, a bit stocky, with a black bowl cut and a cherubic face. His cadence was distinctive— pressured, ironic, flippant on the surface. I had first met Christopher in Manayunk, on a semester break from Penn State a few years before. The circle he moved in, and led, was about poetry first, and what was then called ‘d’ magazine. The one night of the initial meeting, towards the end of ’97, Christopher was quiet. Yet he was ensconced in a social world that was about movement, change, and vitality— master class Bohemianism. I later learned, and was stunned to assimilate, that he had associates in Cheltenham and knew all about me. He knew about my class-confounding troublemaking with Jena in State College, about my stature as both the James Dean of my high school class and (for junior and senior year) a first-tier driver, with a red Jetta at my disposal. I related to him that night, as someone more experienced than me at poetry, as a gestalt context. He had po-jargonese at his disposal which I was soon to acquire but didn’t have yet, had done workshops and completed his BA. When he wrote to *dig in* to specific poems, it was studied beyond posturing, and hip to the Modernists as I was hip to modern philosophy but not Pound, yet (who had, as we well knew, grown up in Cheltenham too). So the hot August night was buttressed, consolidated, by a cold November night which preceded it, even if I had received a rejection slip from ‘d’. We were sitting at a table outside, overhung with foliage from trees, overlooking TLA video store across the street. Suddenly we were overrun with teenagers— street kids, who never knew much but concrete and pavement. Amoreena, the angel, was offered up, in all her raven-headed ingenuousness, to tell Christopher the secret she wanted him to know. As they hovered around us (Christopher having known some of them before), I had a revelation of the wild vitality of Center City Philly. There were modes of being hidden here, from Amoreena’s lean-in moves on out, which I had never experienced before. The suburbs had been slow and moderate; the college town I had known even more so; New York had been so brutish I registered very little at all. Center City was overwhelming in the right way— I had frissons from people and places, all in motion, going someplace. As I walked the long way back to 21st and Race, a magical moment had coalesced, and I knew that I had stepped like an actor into a role I could play— an avatar of channeling, directing, and reconfiguring the streets themselves. The stage was set.

#2

Fast forward into the spring— it's a chilly night in March. I'm sitting on a Septa train to Manayunk with Bill Rosenblum and Pete Lawson, two musicians. As always, Septa trains are a nightmare if you are, or happen to be, stoned. The no-bathroom scenario means you are forced to ride your buzz in a manner suited to suffering and general discomfort. Yet, as Center City develops for me, I learn the rigors of seeing what I can do when stoned. So, as uncomfortable as I am, I am also pushing at the bounds of what I can accomplish in the world as a guerilla-style Bohemian, a fighting flake. The weed we consumed at Bill's apartment was Benzedrine-y. Christopher Severin, otherwise occupied on this night, is letting me run an open-mike night at a coffee-joint called La Tazza on Cotton Street. Bill, Pete and I are investigating the night's buzz, digging in to the ambience, looking for apertures (of consciousness, of emotion) to fit into. I've brought a carton of eggs to break on my chest, as though our act was Iggy and the Stooges. But I wimp out, made fuzzy by E weed— I give the eggs to one of the attendees, once we're ensconced in La Tazza's red-painted basement, which has surprisingly high ceilings, making it an interesting place to read. Bill is short and stout, wears glasses and semi-rags— his day gig isn't much. Having grown up and gone to college in West Chester, and forced to stay in West Chester until his mid-twenties, Bill has a permanent sense of in-built gratitude to be in Philly. The city was always to be his Manifest Destiny— doing an office gig while holding down keyboards for a prominent local band (while also working out studio wonk chops on Pro Tools) is not just what he wants, it's levitational for him. Bill's a talker and high-spirited and thus fun to get high with, whether he wants to discuss (a catholic-minded dude) the 13th Floor Elevators, the novels of Philip K. Dick, or whether the PA system at Doc Watson's has gone permanently haywire. Pete's a lanky redhead with a bushy red beard— how he maintains himself is a mystery. Sort of. Pete spent his childhood, he says, in Chicago, and the confluence of circumstances which brought him to Philly is mysterious. Pete makes up for lacking Bill's solidity by being an able leader-among-men kind of guy. He'll direct action easily, set guidelines and strictures in place, draw up contracts, and his own gig at Office Cents on Chestnut Street gives him leeway to keep the store chop-chop there. Pete's paintings are a graceful semi-rip on Abstract Expressionism, and he follows New York art closely, without having any concrete plans in that direction. The darkness of a kind of sadism is there— me and Bill have both watched Pete behave abusively by this time— but Pete and Bill and I are all bonded by a fierce determination to have a good time, no matter what, held-in piss (and held-in spiteful loathing of Septa) be damned. They're in the game, as I am, to get high and have fun. At twenty-four, and in a state of constant excitement about what might happen in Philly, it's enough for me to get attached to them, particularly Bill, because a studio wonk friend is important to cultivate, for music and books. I need man-power and they (Pete less so) need guidance. Christopher is a figurehead in his own right, centered here on Main Street, but his scene is master class but limited. The world converging around me is dynamic, shot through with people who mean it, but I'm obliged to shape it myself.

#3

There is the problem of mixing worlds and that nobody in Philly does it. Things remain segregated, and to the extent that Philly artists don't mix, the Center City art scene is all dark corners. What happens if you match Christopher with Bill and Pete? Actually, Bill and Christopher, both being well-spoken, well-read, and intellectually astute, mix reasonably well, even as Pete and Christopher don't know what to make of each other. But I'm not worried yet. The energy haunting our shindigs has a golden promise built into it which never seems to fail. One of my compartments is filled by the Center City Goth scene. The pretense of kids who espouse Goth is that the world, being a dark and fearful place, is best confronted and assimilated by fronting, or front-loading, what might seem foreboding. Dressed as an army in black, the girls adorned with black eye-liner, dark lipstick, festooned also with as many body piercings as the human frame will allow, Goth kids lay down a gauntlet of how many ways spookiness can affect a catharsis for those prone to the right kind of pity and terror. Goth ladies of the night may or may not have promiscuous habits, but will never bore you with the crappiness of the mundane— who's making what kind of money, for example, or who's angling for what promotion, or who married or bought what house. The backbone of Goth is transcendentalism above the mundane, into the realm of gods, goddesses, archetypes, and occult and/or fantastic acknowledgements. I meet the niche stalwarts— Lee and Damon Buckner, and Larsen Spurn. Lee and Damon are tall, black, mystical Christians and musicians. Lee is dominant, and always followed by a retinue of Goth kids— Center City raised, precociously sex-and-drugs oriented, attired in black leather pants, fishnet shirts, and chains. Their domain is a series of nightclubs— some, like Evolution, on Delaware Avenue near Penn's Landing, others in South Philly. Lee plays a twelve-string acoustic guitar, and his songs are intense, chromatic-leaning meditations on fairytale worlds— ghosts, goblins, vampires, demons. Prince to Syd Barrett to Ozzy Osbourne. Damon is calmer, more generous and hospitable, often with Lee to lend moral support. Larsen is their rival— a white, Europe-raised transplant with grandiose plans, whose front-man moves borrow heavily from the 80s New Romantics, and whose looks form an unholy shtup between Robert Smith and Simon Le Bon. He sings in a band called Station, and is considered eye candy for the Goth ladies. The night I meet him at the Khyber signifies— the whole Center City Goth crew are there, and I give Larsen my multi-media sales pitch. Again, the feeling manifests— something above our heads is pushing pieces into place, generating a kind of self-reinforcing momentum engendering social structures which stand on their own, without conniving hustles or undue stress. We're all young and moving fast— the vibe is right, and the dope. Larsen, at this point, is always holding, and no social jaunt would be complete without a toast-over-a-spliff. Still, I have to get used to the rough edges these characters live with— no health insurance, bills which can't be paid: scattershot approaches to leading a solid life. Nights I spend at Larsen's at 13th and Ellsworth are a case in point. An invisible shield is protecting all of us. Still, I consolidate the rough streak I acquired in NYC.

#4

I have it in my mind to start doing things at coffeehouses, so I do. What Christopher and I do at Philly Java isn't particularly intense—we sit in the cozy, brick-walled back room, reading our poems. When we get lucky, the Amoreena teenybopper gang grace us with their presence, or Lee and Damon. If other poets show up, so much the better. One thing I notice about Christopher is that he has a knack for graphic design. The fliers he designs for these open readings are all done at the architect's office where he works at on Main Street in Manayunk, and have a nouveau Dada feel, and the images are memorable. The Last Drop, also, is available, and I arrange a show there for Lee and Bill and Pete. Noteworthy about the Last Drop on 13th and Pine: more even than Philly Java, it's a waystation for young, hip, creative types in Center City, especially DJs and indie rock folk. With its black, coffered, high ceilings, and Christmas-y, green and red interior, the Last Drop reeks of a Philadelphian version of Paris, or wherever else in Europe the architecture is elegant and expansive. Not to mention that what gets spun at the Drop is always big news: indie classics like the Kinks and Big Star, Western seaboard feminist agit-prop like Le Tigre, and electronic club mixes debuted to break in afternoon coffees and cappuccinos (rather than coke and E) as well. One thing I've already let go of is the need to be the main attraction. If you want to put a scene together, you have to know how to juggle egos; to hold a hollow emptiness in your consciousness for others to enter and establish themselves. Bill likes to work with a poetess named Dara March, who is several years younger than him but is another West Chester hold-out. He plays keyboards while she recites. I had known Dara as a poetry editor in the 90s, and a detested rival of Christopher Severin. Predictably, Christopher remains unexcited that Dara has now been asked, through Bill, to participate, even as there's nothing in the situation this time to make Dara look more powerful than us. I've invented a moniker for the series I'm putting together—This Charming Lab. Thank you Morrissey, thank you Beckenham Arts Lab. The night of the show, the Drop overflows with Lee's minions. They are not shy about referring to their bowls for further refreshment. The proprietor of the Drop is fuming (for this and other reasons) but the show goes on. And I've got my girl Joan there, she's Goth, a teenager who still lives with her parents (and pet sea-monkeys) in Germantown, and Larsen and Lee hate each other so Larsen is missing, and the thronged downstairs, green smoke fuzzing the room, is about heaven, and what I want forever.

#5

One thing I do with Bill Rosenblum is patrol Olde City and other neighborhoods, looking for venues. We're usually stoned when we do this; Bill teaches me the nooks and crannies around Center City where you can get stoned in the street. I'm in love with the Center City streets at night; they have an odd kind of peacefulness (especially when held up against the grisliness of NYC). How City Hall looks walking west on Market at midnight; a solid, baroque mass of brick, white marble and limestone. It has a way of imposing, interrogating whether there is anything in your brain to match it, brick by brick, limestone by limestone. Did you know your brain could be a building? Or how the Liberty Place Towers look from Arch or Race Street, near the Trocadero— a dare, a gambit to see what you can withstand about the sublimity built into the human brain and its constructs. The sublime, Schopenhauer teaches us, can attract or repulse, but invariably frightens. In Philadelphia, the buildings always have a way of scaring us into obeisance, and admiration. Dope takes the buildings and marshmallows them. Bill and I are moseying, one night, down Second Street in Olde City between Market and Arch, and stumble across a joint called the Upside Down Café. It's run by an attractive African-American woman with a Jamaican accent: Mimi. Mimi wears clinging dresses which expose her extreme thinness, and her physiology is tolerant, if uninterested. She doesn't need to know about Pound, or Philip K. Dick. She clearly thinks we're both on the cute side of things. She's accommodating and gives us the run of the place, to do events as we choose. Now, This Charming Lab has at least a sort-of home, in an *el primo* location, on a block second-tier for First Fridays but by no means unused or derelict. The events we put on at the Upside Down don't change much— we are “newbies,” not plugged into any hot circuits yet, and don't have much draw. But we're doing multimedia, literature and music together (writers and bands) in Center City Philly, and I thought (perhaps) I could investigate trying to get This Charming Lab some press. Fodder for all of us, City Paper and Philly Weekly did for Center City what the Village Voice did for Manhattan— presented us with a cultural reality declared to be crest-of-the-wave. I was skeptical, even then, especially as books are stalagmites about crest-of-the-wave action when it's short term. But Renaissance men of daring, like Bill and myself, could stomach both crests of both waves— the baby short-term ones and the more stalwart eternity ones. So, we lived on a daily diet of both serious stuff and the jejune free-press weeklies. I was to learn that the press is its own dark corner, not animated by too many specks of light, but specks to be cherished when and if you find them.

#6

Olde City is famous around Philly and the East Coast for its “First Fridays.” On the first Friday of every month, all the Olde City art galleries opened their doors and offered new shows, wine and cheese. As of the turn of the century, Philly has produced little to compete with the hoopla of New York’s century XX art scene. Philly visual art has a reputation for being staid, formalist. I will later learn that Philly formalism in painting begins with PAFA (Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts) and its mascot Andrew Wyeth. But the set-up is cozy and sensuous and it seemed logical at the time that on First Fridays This Charming Lab would set up shop at the Upside Down, which was advantageously placed, with its glass panel façade, to attract street traffic. Bill and Dara do spoken-word with keyboards, I read and play a few numbers on my acoustic, Christopher swooshes in to do his usual read-from-a-book (usually Pound) routine. Christopher has a major publishing connection in the Midwest, and some goods have been delivered to him on that front. Still, it was easy for Bill and I to notice that he was disgruntled with poetry. He felt, after the collapse of ‘d’, that poetry was just too much of an uphill struggle, a wearisome battle against insurmountable odds. So that, when I might inquire if Christopher wanted to read some of his own work, it was pulling teeth time. Poetry as a dystopic context loomed large in my future, too, but I felt strongly that Christopher was giving up too fast, and that the big historical wave scenario requires Herculean patience. For these early nights, I linger behind Christopher in poetry as someone less published, less experienced. I was also, as he would’ve known, innocent of the nature of “po-biz,” which turned out, years later, to have so much of nothingness and dross in it that I admired Christopher getting in the ring at all. It was not for me to say whether he was doing the right thing for himself. Looking back, This Charming Lab was doing the right thing for itself— starting small, building gradually. But in some ways, I’m already dissatisfied— my ambition for some kind of grandiosity is getting the better of me. I was young enough then to have crest-of-the-wave, media lust. So I’m split in half— delighted by being in a new place, but frustrated by a small stage and an even smaller response. Sometimes I can forget this dichotomy in a haze of pot smoke, sometimes I get depressed. Tonight the ambience is just right to allow me to get lost in it all. The Upside Down looks decent— white tiled floors, Center City’s wonted high ceilings. And I get dragged by crazy Jean Walsh, Sister Ghoulish, who is occupying her own painting studio in Powelton Village, over to the Painted Bride once festivities are over at nine. Jean, a whirling dervish blonde, is a banshee on the loose among the Center City culture squad. A gypsy in spirit, she migrates from guy to guy, and scene to scene, collecting social (and sexual) trinkets. She knew, past the moodiness I evinced at the Upside Down not filling up, what buttons to push, so that Friday remained Friday, and nirvana was in attendance.

#7

I find myself, through Lee and Damon and Larsen, doing West Philly house parties too. That winter, Damon throws a house party the wildness of which I've never experienced. The drug situation is drastic—people are lining up outside the bathroom to shoot H. That's Goth: a lunge into everything "down," making an H buzz choice for them, a crystal meth buzz declassé, beyond the pale. Reach out and touch faith. Goth kids loved rituals and ritualistic behaviors, and all the tactile insignias of junk had a huge in-built glamor quotient. I was buzzed on pot as usual, and not in line to do the H routine even if I'd wanted to. The top Goths did, in fact, cut heads with H. I was not an impostor among the Goths, and here at Damon's house, but a mid-level semi-familiar presence. They liked me, the girls, because I was cute, and said strange things. I was also up on my occult lore, and was proud to announce myself (here) as a true Scorpio. Larsen, another Scorpion, is here (he doesn't mind Damon as much as Lee) with a stout, voluptuous blonde who looks like a porn star. She declares herself a Virgo princess. We get righteously stoned all over again, and then everything begins to move in slow motion. The rest of the night passes me by like a movie— I'm in a dark room with Larsen's date, but too paranoid to hit on her; I'm standing on the porch, watching someone (for some reason) dive over the railing into the front yard, and then the railing itself collapse into the yard; I'm sitting ("like a spider," someone said) watching the Goth crew dance to Bauhaus (Peter Murphy's a righteous head-of-state figure for this group); I'm noticing what everyone else noticed, that Lee failed to show up. Finally, at four a.m., I'm betraying my roots and phoning for a goddamned taxi. My truth is my truth— I'm not as nervy, as brutish, as these kids are. I don't need to suffer the torments of hitting the West Philly streets on foot at four a.m. That's why there will always be an edge of unease, sometimes, between me and the other participants in This Charming Lab. I'm not as authentically city as they are. But the middle-class sense of self-worth and polish I have is useful to them, too.

#8

By March, I manage to score a date for This Charming Lab at the Khyber Pass. It is worth noting that, in 2000, the Khyber shone as a beacon of rock success in Philly. Everyone wanted to play the Khyber, and I hustled hard to get us in there. Luminaries at the Khyber was nothing unusual. Once, later in 2000, we even managed to share a calendar with Alex Chilton. And Lisa and I met Conor Oberst there; did, in fact, make out in front of him semi-rapaciously as a gag. Who's the real heartthrob, Omaha? That having been said, not a very ambient place. The combination of low ceilings, rampant wood paneling, linoleum, dim lighting, and a bar area crammed hectically against the event space made for so-so levitation and transcendental deliverance. This group didn't find a real home until the Highwire several years later. Back to this debut night—it has to be all music. All the Station characters are becoming important in my life. Larsen's guitar player, David, was raised middle-class by two professors in Australia, of all places. He and his brother are in Philly to attend U of Penn. David is there to do math, but his attitude is lax at best. He's as good-looking as Larsen, tall, broad, and jovial. He also prides himself on sleeping around. Our main topic of conversation is music. David has a fondness for "classic rock" which Larsen doesn't share. He was broken in, as Larsen was not, and I was, to Zeppelin-Floyd, and all the other magic circuits, as an early adolescent, and to groove on the classics was second-nature to him. What's interesting to me about David is that working-class postures and attitudes fit him like a glove. He seems more authentic to the Center City scene than me. If jaunty downward mobility is the story of our early adulthood, David is more graceful and effortless about it. He knows how to look ratty, torn jeans and all, the right way. Even as the Station Svengali was the bassist, Ray, who wrote all the tunes and arranged all the shows. In any event, Station are to headline the Khyber show. Lee has become difficult to manage and I've had to exclude him. He's too narcissistic to participate in any scene. It's a shame—he writes compelling tunes. But any artistic scene requires that you be able to jump out of yourself at least part of the time, and he can't. Meanwhile, I'm having bizarre love affairs, Jean, Joan, Lisa, on the side. They add, from Logan Square, to the general feeling of expectancy, especially Jean, who carries some heaviness as a hipster goddess in Center City. A dead ringer for Nina Persson, Jean Walsh paints geometric patterns, abstractions, in a way that would later make Trish and Tobi chunder. Yet her own co-op studio space, in Powelton Village, is another way-station, with scenesters in and out all the time, and everyone looks to her for direction. With the Khyber on the horizon, I don't have trouble keeping the flock, which Trish and Tobi have not joined yet, interested. As the entire city suffers a spell, that March, of insomnia, with dope dusted with some version of crystal meth derivative, and I sit through an entire haircut stoned, at the Chop Shop on South Street, and begin learning about Temple early.

#9

Center City Philly is not just a conglomeration of artistic people for me but a conglomeration of places. I learn the character of different streets— Pine Street is genteel and refined, with several blocks devoted to antique shops and not much traffic. Walnut Street, the main thoroughfare of Center City, has everything all together— first-rate restaurants like Le Bec Fin, glamorous boutiques, four-star hotels, and, of course, Independence Hall. Chestnut Street, one block north, has a grungy feel— nothing fancy, but dollar-stores, low-end department stores, and (then) the old Sam Eric movie theater. South Street, several blocks south of Walnut and Chestnut, is (supposedly) *it*; the epicenter of Center City cultural life. But by the turn of the century, South Street has been commercialized, and even Zipperhead (a repository boutique of punk and Goth fashion where I buy my fishnet shirts) is on its last legs. What's hidden in the interstices is better than what's on the thoroughfares— Philly Java Company with its funky back room between Lombard and South on Fourth Street; the Last Drop Coffeeshouse, with its high, coffered ceilings and French ambience at 13th and Pine; Dirty Frank's, the best of Center City's sleazy dive-bars, caddy-corner to it; and McGlinchey's, which serves cheap stout and lager and runs neck-in-neck with Frank's (Glinch has a better jukebox), wedged on 15th between Locust and Spruce (both inconspicuous streets with no particular identity). It's the hidden gems which make Center City for me; and I stick to them. Yet the most valuable time I spend has to be the time I spend at home in Logan Square. Logan Square is quirky— the most important quirk is that not everyone even knows it as Logan Square. To many, even experienced Center City hipsters, it's just a neighborhood comprised of a bunch of streets without a name. Yet the closeness to Logan Circle on Race Street, an elaborate sculpture-fountain which kids swim in over the summer (and I swam in once during the summer after my freshman year at CHS) with a ring of benches in a circle around it, means that it's an even mix of those willing to call the neighborhood Logan Square, and those unwilling to give it that appellation. To me, it doesn't matter— it's my home. I felt that way as soon as I moved in, in the late summer of '99. I live on 21st Street, and the view from my second floor bay windows is astonishingly rich. South-east, the skyline, dominated by the Liberty Place towers. North-east, the back of the Franklin Institute. Due north, the beginnings of the parkway (which means that every July 4th, where I live is flooded with bodies); due south, a movement back to grunge from Arch onto Market Street. Nothing grungy about Logan Square; large, sleek white row-houses which actually house studio, one or two bedroom apartments, and a few normal apartment buildings (like Westminster Arch, where I will move in 2008). Pete's Famous Pizza, east down the block at 21st and Cherry, offers simple diner fare for reasonable prices, and good company. As of 2000, I like to do breakfast there when I can. Around the corner on Race, Wagon Train Deli, where I can always pick up morning coffee. In short, I couldn't dream of a better neighborhood to set up shop in than Logan Square in '99-2000. It means that all my adventures in cultural delinquency happen against the backdrop of having a place to crash that I actually care about. It also means that at any moment, the chiaroscuro of human life could settle on a blazing sense of brightness, based on contingent circumstances around me. The backdrop, set in place, contradicted all the alienation I felt in my adolescence and replaced it with a sense that there could always be some graciousness in the human world, the human continuum, somewhere.

#10

What develops very fast for me in Center City is a need to prioritize. Everything seems to be leading me away from literature and into music; so music (for the time being) is what I decide to stick to for a while. I've kept contacts in New York and can record there almost whenever I want and for free. I try to shop these recordings around to Philly independent labels, with little initial luck. Center City, like the East Village in the late Nineties, has no in-built scene to speak of. At a young age, and sharp enough to be status-conscious (which Larsen and the rest of the Lab crew aren't), I drooled at the idea of getting signed. The first Khyber show is a one-off— I'm to be backed by a drummer and bass player who are only signed on for that show. As had happened in State College and New York, I had trouble finding musicians to play with. The night of the show (a chilly April night) is hectic, and the Station guys dominate it. They have a redhead named Nora, who David is apparently shagging, following them around with a video camera. Station are the headline act, and most of the crowd shows up to see them. To me, there's something profoundly joyless about the whole experience— not just because me and my music are relegated to the sidelines, but because the Station guys are “hamming it up.” They come across as attractive but irresponsible and (potentially) unprofessional. This Charming Lab has already established a few rules and folkways. One is that the after-parties have to beat the gigs. We roll, stoned, down the Olde City streets, too high to care about status— and the chill leaves the air.

#11

The vibe between Larsen and I is interesting— it’s clear to me that Larsen was raised working-class, but his parents are Europeans. Larsen has traveled all over Europe. He doesn’t necessarily fit into the Center City scene any better than I do. Larsen’s social niche falls between the Goth and punk scenes, and he’s perpetually obsessing over some girl or other. We’re both true-blue with the ladies. He’s not skeasy like the Cheltenham guys I grew up with— he nails his girls before he obsesses about them. I’m having some luck on that level too— we commiserate. Larsen’s angle is always the same— the guys who get the most (so to speak) also get trampled the most. It’s headed towards summer and we’re always stoned as we walk around. Larsen is ambitious but undisciplined— he’s not writing the Station songs. Mike, the bass player, runs the show from the side, and lets Larsen and David front the band. I sense quickly (and with alacrity) that Larsen could get me into trouble. The weed we smoke sometimes seems laced; we take joyrides in “ambiguously owned” cars (Larsen is good at “borrowing”). Larsen, during these years, has an odd light of luck around him which I’m instinctive enough to notice. To make a long story short, Larsen (with David on the side) effortlessly corrupts me. The system has to work, because I’m getting them gigs. There’s something in the bank for all of us.

#12

As summer rolls in, it seems to me that This Charming Lab needs to plan something big. A little press would be nice, but we haven't dealt with the higher rungs of bands yet. If I could get, for example, the Eyeliners onboard for a show, we'd finally have the right wattage. I put together some money and rent out the Killtime Warehouse in West Philly. It's usually used for punk shows and meetings of radicals, and it's run by a ring of junkies. Station will play, of course, and I've roped in the Eyeliners (an all-girl band who do girly schmaltzy indie-punk), and Bill and Dara, and a miscellaneous cast of others. About an hour into the show, and with very few people having shown up, I make a fatal mistake— I let the Eyeliners smoke me up. It's potent weed and I'm blitzed enough to begin enjoying myself. The problem is, at about ten p.m. throngs of people begin to show up to see the Eyeliners. I'm supposed to be collecting money at the door, and I'm too skittish and paranoid to do so. I try to enlist Bill and Dara to do it but they're even more non compos mentis than I am. It's a little disillusioning no one pitches in— This Charming Lab was supposed to be a co-op. If I'm the only one trying (and the Station guys are too high and mighty to do menial work, off chatting up girls), TCL isn't going to be what I thought it was, even as no one left.

#13

One thing I've noticed is that This Charming Lab isn't making me happy. I'm a bundle of nerves. The reason would have to be that what happened at the Killtime signifies— I'm running the show by myself. On the side are nice times— with girls, or fucking around with Bill and Pete on lazy stoned West Philly afternoons. But the business of trying to push a bunch of acts forward is wearing me down. My own tunes I'm trying to sell at these shows form a whole— “The Seduction of Sara Starr.” While I'm in shape to play them, nobody seems to listen. David does, and I appreciate it— but Larsen has a bunch of defenses up. So does Lee. Bill and Pete are unabashedly “junk-rooted,” and my tunes are too classicist for them. I always have an acute sense of my own smallness— and what's in the air is that the Philly free press has blacklisted us. We're either too unprofessional or too gauche, or both. No one in the Philly press corps likes my ambition, either. They don't want a scene in Philly, especially one which translates nationally or internationally. They like doing hit-and-run routines where they cast bands or performers up, then shoot them down again. I'm sharp enough to realize quickly— where music is concerned, I'm in the wrong place at the wrong time. This is my first, and most hurtful, Center City tragedy, but I take it in stride.

#14

One branch I've got going which many of my friends don't notice is an interest in modern and post-modern art. By this time, I'm fascinated by post-modernity generally, and I learn the charmed names—Warhol, Nauman, Koons. Nauman, especially, attracts me—the West Coast, stalagmite creepiness of his early video work (product, I can't help but believe, of high marijuana intake), matched with a penchant for absurdism, balance out the direct and uncompromising brutishness of the East Coast life I'm leading. My nightly routine, when I get home from Barnes & Noble (where both I and Lisa work as booksellers) and when I happen to be alone, involves a pile of post-modern art books and approximately two bowls of weed. If I like Basquiat's playfulness, I'm repulsed by the vacuity of Jeff Koons; if Paul McCarthy is a bit too Willy Wonka, Ed Ruscha's sense of language, space, and minimalism in two dimensions gets under my skin. New York art, I learn, likes to stay on the surface, with big, bold gestures about the guts it takes to take up space in the world. The sense of spirituality is just about raw courage, raw guts. When Warhol, for instance, means it, that's what you get. Because PMA is a short walk from Logan Square, I am there often, gawking at the Great Stair Hall, and Diana, trying to decide how much of the past centuries work I can assimilate (like Rubens' Prometheus), and not just settle for what's there that everybody knows. Including, it turns out, the famous Nauman neon "The true artist..." which I've been vibing the right way at home. There's no one to talk with about visual art yet; but a young lady named Trish Webber works with me at B & N, and I have my eyes on her. There's a high and mightiness to Ms. Webber against post-modernity, which is very crisp. Trish likes the Renaissance and is a student of Renaissance Humanism. The first few months I know Trish Webber, and am informed of her association with PAFA, she's terse, slightly defensive when I define myself to her as an artist. It is by no means love at first sight. Even if, in the parlance of those times, she's a Gwyneth and a half. Once, in the summer of 2000, I called her randomly. I don't even remember how I got her number. She was still with John from Media, another aesthete, who I grew to like very much. The phone call, however, tanked fast. For Trish, I later learned, there was a version of *Pride and Prejudice* playing itself out. John wasn't directly competitive with her the way I was. Still, in 2000 that's in the background. Conversely, it's taken for granted by me by 2000 that visual art for me is both an interest and an issue. When I walk around Center City stoned, I try to imagine what life would look like through a painter's eyes—West Philly, especially, is oddly picturesque, and many of the houses (half-dilapidated though they might be) are exquisite, as is all the architecture in Philly. I can still walk around with a good clean buzz on; if there is any danger, I don't notice it. For Bill and Pete (who, together, prefer the spaciness of semi-primitive, semi-formal art, somewhere between New York and Philly) and I, this is what everything reduces to—a buzz. We move forward on waves from the buildings.

#15

So: my interest in post-modern art leads me to the PMA. The modern art section has in it the Bruce Nauman neon, Jasper Johns' "Painting with Two Balls," and a cache of late-period Rothkos. I'm even more struck how Cubist Picasso looks up close; by the Renaissance art on the second floor; and by the Calder mobile in the Great Stair Hall I'd forgotten having seen as a kid. Bill and Christopher appreciate my need to talk about such things, but the This Charming Lab musical crew turn a deaf ear. As summer wears on, we do Doc Watson's and the Philly Fringe Festival at the Upside Down. The Fringe people don't give us any special treatment; we're "local," and all their hype goes to national and international acts. The culminating Fringe show for us happens at a venue called La Tazza 108 (an extension of Christopher's La Tazza in Manayunk) at Front and Chestnut. I have friends coming in from New York and D.C. to play, including Samantha Fry, who will remain a presence for many years, as a hold-out from my Manhattan time. But the lack of press around This Charming Lab shows; there's no buzz. Into the fall, I have the conviction that this has to end. We've been black-listed in Philly and there's no way up for us. My writing during this epoch is a scattershot enterprise. On a day to day basis, I may choose to churn something out, I may not. Piles of poems line the tops of bookshelves and the large wooden desk which closes my living room space. My reading habits, beyond art books, are also a scattershot hodge-podge of classics, near-classics, and juvenilia-engendering kitsch. That's why rock then had to be a trap for me. I can't mean it like everybody else. Tons of bands start playing to empty rooms and work their way up. With my interest in pursuing books and visual art, I know, in a tragic way of knowing, that I don't have the patience to face those empty rooms for years just to get indie-signed and go rock-ballistic. Bill Rosenblum lives then up 21st Street close to Chestnut. Not Logan Square anymore, but Logan Square-ish. He's a fun companion who generally understands where I'm at. Bill's flat is a low-ceiling'd, shabbily furnished, barely windowed mess. Everything's strewn everywhere. Still, it's another safe haven where I can get some rest and some peace. Bill introduces me to another level of visually rich kitsch: comic books. Bill's crazy about color combinations and graphics, as Christopher is. Comic book and other kinds of graphic art have a lot invested in punch, verve, pizzazz. They are, of course, very close to Pop. What Bill taught me, both verbally and with his comic books, turned out to be important: in art, as in everything else, get your kicks where you find them. Whatever gets you off, gets you off. Art is supposed to be fun. Have and maintain the integrity of your own individual tastes, even if it's Adult Swim on Cartoon Network. Even at this very early stage of the game, I knew that Trish and Bill are semi-obvious enemies. I try out some of Bill's tenets where she can hear; Trish Webber seems to look at me strangely.